

# Seeking Authentic Changes: New Performance-based Report Cards

---

*By Fernando Fleurquin*

Informing parents and students of a student's progress is an ongoing task for EFL teachers. This is largely done informally and spontaneously on an almost daily basis, either answering students' questions or parents' requests for information on students' performance in class. However, several times a year we have to prepare a thorough evaluation and report of our learners' performance. At our Binational Center, we have developed useful assessment and evaluation tools and have devised practical and informative ways to report students' results.

For several years, our report cards included three boxes, which were completed with teachers' comments on the students' oral, written, and overall performance each term. Filling in this kind of information was no easy task because comments for each student should be original and suggestive and, at the same time, they should be an accurate reflection of the student's performance. More experienced and inspired teachers had fewer problems with this task and devoted less time to it. However, the types of comments that prevailed were too general or vague, either giving an overall grade or general comment on the learner's oral or written expression, commenting on the quality of their participation, or giving general suggestions (e.g., very good oral participation; you are always motivated in class; you should write more; remember to do your homework).

## **In Need of a Change**

We decided we needed a more accurate system to report students' results. In fact, since assessment and instruction are two sides of the same coin, we needed to adapt the assessment and evaluation procedures in such a way that they faithfully reflected our teaching practices. We needed a change that would help us reach the following improvements:

- a. raise our expectations and standards for students' performance at an institutional level;
- b. increase opportunities for authentic assessment in each class and throughout the course;
- c. strengthen feedback provided to each learner throughout the course;
- d. achieve a more specific reporting of students' performance by the end of each term;
- e. provide more evidence of the status of the student's progress to parents.

## **First Step: Defining the Outcomes Expected**

When we started analyzing our needs, we realized we needed to define the performance that we expected of students in the first place. In this way, teachers, students, and parents could be

informed of the minimum expectations for each school year. Thus, we appointed a team to write, revise, and edit the performance outcomes for our students' courses.

The six-year program was divided into two main levels: grades 1 through 3, and grades 4 through 6. In our case, with three hours of English instruction per week and with learners who may begin studying English at almost any age, there is a significant difference between their performance during the first three and the last three years of English courses. Even when there are two main levels defined, teachers know how each performance statement can be interpreted and accomplished in each different course.

Once we had defined these outcomes, we found that we were able to reach several new goals. We could improve our assessment practices. We could make use of a wider variety of authentic assessment instruments and practices (such as classroom observation, reflective writing, performance assessment, self-assessment checklists, and portfolio assessment) with more precision and reliability. The conclusions we reached would be more valid portraits of the quality of students' accomplishments. Based on the outcomes defined, a checklist could be easily prepared to follow each child's progress in the different areas. In this sense, the most important advantage of having outcomes is that teachers know which types of performance to assess and therefore to observe, to keep written records of, and to inform and discuss with students and parents.

## **From Outcomes to Report Cards**

To design the report cards, we divided the outcomes into three main categories: oral language development, the reading and writing process, and learning attitude. In this way, we could give more unity and coherence to the different components of students' performance.

Aside from the skills traditionally assessed, we included a special section on student's learning attitude, in which we could show perceived signs of the student's learning preferences and motivation. The areas we emphasized include the interest and motivation that the student shows in and out of class, how the student tolerates and accepts mistakes as an integral part of learning, how respectfully the student interacts with the class, and how effectively the student carries out the assigned tasks.

## **Finding a Scale that Fits Our Purposes**

The scale we are using is an interesting attempt to depart from the traditional numbers or grades that are used in most public and private schools. The main effect created by using these evolving concepts is that the results reported are only one snapshot in a much longer process; they reflect our assumption that these results are dynamically changing with the student's performance, rather than conforming to a stagnant concept. Therefore, we truly emphasize the idea that learning involves a change, that learning is a process, that it is in constant evolution, and that learning involves a different process for each learner, who may need more or less time to understand and learn certain content. From the beginning, we assume that if a certain performance is not

attained, it may be because the student is not yet ready to demonstrate that she or he has learned it. In other words, we show real confidence in the student. We know that if we continue providing an enticing classroom atmosphere; if we promote attractive and safe learning conditions in which the student can feel free to take risks, to create with language, to express his or her own voice; and if the student continues receiving reassuring and encouraging feedback from the teacher, the student will reach the expected levels of performance at his or her own pace, in due time.

## **Our Audience: Students and Parents**

Report cards are aimed at both parents and students. However, to involve students even more in their own learning process and to help them accept more responsibility for their own learning, the comments and suggestions the teacher makes are addressed to the student and not to the parents. Furthermore, eliciting the student's response and signature encourages a real exchange of information between students and parents, fostering more critical thinking and developing higher awareness of the factors that improve or hinder the student's learning progress. And to generate a stronger sense of personal commitment to the performance reported, we leave a space for students to include one of their own classroom pictures so that each report card will have a unique and colorful cover.

We explained the changes in the report cards to parents in our first meeting with them, explaining some of the concepts mentioned in this article and even some of the performance outcomes. It took some time for them to process this information, but their feedback has been very positive. We feel they are now more accurately informed of the real performance of their students.

## **Conclusion**

We are still learning and changing accordingly. We continue receiving feedback from teachers, learners, and parents on the implementation of this report card system, and we will need to continue making minor adjustments.

Our instruction is truly congruent with our assessment practices. Having progressed to more authentic ways of assessing our students has implied adopting reliable and personalized instruments to report our assessment conclusions. By understanding the nature of the learning process in our particular context, we have taken steps to develop performance assessments that portray our learners' real accomplishments, to develop students' awareness of their own progress and responsibility for their own learning, and to periodically inform students and parents of the real performance changes that take place in our classrooms.

**Fernando Fleurquin** has been teaching EFL in Montevideo, Uruguay, for 15 years. Currently, he is the Academic Director of the Binational Center.